

# Remodeling Britney Spears: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation

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*This article examines a range of perspectives and cluster of discourses that are informed by the reading of one single video, Toxic, performed by pop icon Britney Spears. In our investigation, we seek new directions for audiovisual analysis and attempt to explore the music text alongside symbolic meanings mediated by a video. Of particular interest are the intersection of characters played by the star with constructions of personal narrative, issues of exoticism in music, queering strategies, race and sexuality, audiovisual genealogies, and the relationship of the singing voice to song structure and meaning. We conclude that the musical interpretation of pop videos calls for a mode of analysis that reflects the multivalent and allusive nature of this audiovisual form.*

It was during the early 1980s, with the historic launch of MTV, that videos became one of the most important vehicles for promoting popular music. Those of us who were around during this period will recall that responses to the first spate of music videos were very different from what they are today. Indeed, there was an underlying skepticism on the part of many music scholars and journalists that videos trivialized the “music itself” and that visual representations were mere distractions. While spectacles of musical performance have been around for centuries, MTV signaled something quite different: now music could be beamed to millions simultaneously across time and space.

When it comes to musicological approaches, surprisingly little scholarly work on pop videos has been forthcoming. There are no good explanations for this. Apart from a few scattered studies, mainly dominated by E. Anne Kaplan’s *Rocking Around the Clock* (1987) and Andrew Goodwin’s *Dancing in the Distraction Factory* (1993), the issue of video analysis has not been taken up nearly enough within popular music scholarship.

By advocating a systematic approach to understanding the construction of the relationship between the visual strata of a video and the music, our purpose is to deal with how pictures open up new meanings for songs. Theoretically speaking, this position is grounded in an insistence on the reciprocal nature of the audiovisual

contract, which invariably implies some degree of contamination and projection across different media (Chion 9). Siding with film theorist Michel Chion, our consideration of the role of music is directed to the transference of one set of references onto the other, and how this constitutes the primary function of the visual text. In particular, we seek to demonstrate how the star persona and their personal narratives in pop videos raise significant issues that deal with cinematic and pop genealogy. In addition, the interest that the voice holds in this respect prompts numerous excursions into examining vocal structurations via articulation, phonology, and animation. Underpinning this study is also the matter of the body, and how images of hypersexualization are the direct result of the technologization of erotics through production.

No longer simply a promo device, but more a marketable product in its own right,<sup>1</sup> the music video takes on its own life after repeated viewings, produces different understandings, and even becomes more important than the song. The full effect of a video undoubtedly has a range of aesthetic implications, which are related to contexts that vary significantly from cinema. We know that experiencing images via a television or iPod screen is different from viewing via a cinema screen. Furthermore, pop videos frame musical references in ways other than that of cinema, which thus implies a need for a flexible approach that stresses how various texts pertaining to pop culture interrelate with one another. For this reason, we offer an intertextual method that exposes the fluidity and blurring of style and its function. In turn, this forms part of an approach that involves the transportation of one or more group of signs into another, accompanied by new articulations of both enunciative and denotative positions. Because a pop video deals with productivity at the same time as creativity, there is a critical relationship to genre that is redistributive and permutative. This would suggest that, in the space of a single video, numerous utterances intersect and activate one another, which raises questions concerning personal narrative and how this determines performativity.

### **Personal Narrative as Performative**

Central to our analysis is the category of “personal narrative,” although our deployment of the term diverges from the vernacular sense, which is concerned with how pop *auteurs* tell stories of their lives through the medium of song.<sup>2</sup> It differs also from the writing of certain North American musicologists, who have grounded interpretations of music in their own personal histories.<sup>3</sup> Some work on personal narrative drawing on research in cultural history and developmental psychology has appeared in recent research on pop, but none of this takes *pop performance* as its explicit starting point.<sup>4</sup> While we acknowledge the relevance of existing research, the idea of personal narrative in our view frames better discussions within a conceptual apparatus, such as that provided by psychologist Dan McAdams, who draws on the ideas of Paul Ricoeur concerning the ubiquity of temporal coding in human experience. McAdams is interested in the stories people tell about themselves in order

to invest actions and events with meaning. Personal narrative of this kind is about the narrative reconstitution of the self through an open-ended process of reflection and revision. By marking<sup>5</sup> certain events in personal histories as significant, while at the same time bypassing others, personal narrators create navigational beacons that enable themselves and others to make sense of the past, while providing points of reference that will inform interpretations of future actions and events. Identity, in this sense, is negotiated by means of an ongoing dialogue between past and present selves (McAdams 5). Personal narratives, then, are performative: they pertain not only to *what* we tell but *how* we tell and act.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, they are subject to the same forces and constraints that inform all interpretative acts. Thus, observations regarding the perceived trajectory of Britney Spears' career are interconnected with the parallel narrative trajectories of audience members. It is here that processes of identification and identity formation that have been the subject of much recent writing in popular music research come into play (e.g. Hawkins *Settling*; Kassabian *Hearing*; Whiteley). Personal narrative is implicated therefore at both ends of the communication chain as well as in the myriad forms of mediation that are implicated in popular texts: thus Spears' first-person accounts of her life in interviews and songs constitute only a fraction of the relevant material, which can be elucidated only by detailed analysis of pop performances and related discursive texts.

Spears is a performer whose perceived self-representations have raised problems from the outset. Parental groups in several countries have expressed concern about the "mixed signals" put forward in aspects of her music and public persona. Such concerns coalesced in controversial cover shots for *Rolling Stone* and in the video *Baby One More Time*, both of which were widely perceived as signifying simultaneously immaturity and eroticism. In an important study on the reception of Spears, Melanie Lowe shows that it was not solely parents who objected to the star's "mixed signals." Teenaged girls characterized the star as a "slore" (an elision of slut and whore: Lowe 124–25) not so much because of her provocative attire and raw behavior, which they found acceptable in other stars (including Christina Aguilera), as in the combination of these traits with her affected naivety. For fans, agency is a critical factor: Spears' behavior was regarded as acceptable to the extent that *she herself* could be shown to be responsible for key artistic decisions (Lowe 138). Taking such attitudes on board, recent documentaries on the star have gone to great lengths to attribute agency (e.g. *Time Out*; "ABC Television Special"). A parallel revisionist campaign has been conducted in her recent lyrics, visual representations, and music, but it remains moot just how successful it has been. While it is beyond the scope of this article to conduct an overarching ethnographic survey into changing perceptions of Spears in the light of these revisionist strategies, research in this field convinces us that the line of inquiry we are taking is not out of kilter with reception.

Pursuing the idea of personal narrative, it is something of a truism to observe that Spears is doing her growing up in public. In fact, audiences witness very little of this "growing up" and, what they do see, is heavily mediated. That her core audience is growing up with her, or, as often seems to be the case, *apart from her* is seldom

acknowledged. Many fans who followed Spears' music in the 1990s, a proportion of whom are now university students, are scathing in their attitude toward the star, something that can presumably be attributed in part to a natural shedding of "childhood" identities. This makes it necessary for the star to undergo visible and audible transformations in order to fend off disaffection and optimize the demographic profile of her fan base. Of particular salience to interpretations of her recent music is the perceived trajectory from teen star/vamp to would be *auteur* in the mould of her mentor Madonna (who, we know, underwent a struggle to achieve *auteur* status). This biographical trajectory of performing artists is frequently an aspect of reception, as evidenced in the flashback video sequences in recent concerts by older artists such as Cher and Madonna.<sup>7</sup> In these terms, the music video *Toxic* can easily be interpreted as an attempt to chart and performatively bring about transformations in Spears' star persona. Through the attribution of a mediated authorship, then, we seek to demonstrate how the video constitutes a form of personal narrative: Spears, as we envision her, telling a story of Spears. The investigation conducted in this article focuses on the specific audiovisual performance of *Toxic*.

### Narrative Structure

The song "Toxic" (Dennis, Karlsson, Winnberg, and Jonback)<sup>8</sup> is characterized by a form of musico-textual iconicity that lends itself to the repetitive structures of dance music and the shorthand narrative conventions of music video. This iconicity of music and words is channeled into an elliptical storyboard of events whose spectacular impact might for some viewers override narrative considerations. Nevertheless, for viewers enticed by the audiovisual impact of the song or otherwise willing to invest in more focused observation, a story of sorts is implied, which becomes increasingly difficult to ignore in the course of repeated viewings/hearings. Notably, the music video *Toxic* employs the kind of temporal disjunction found in neo-noir films (such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Lost Highway*, and *Memento*) in which a significant event in the plot is withheld until the strategy of flashback unlocks the mystery of the unfolding present. Thus, when Spears' character chances upon her lover in the shower with another women in a rapid-fire montage of three musically accented shots, located almost subliminally towards the end of the video (each lasts less than a second), it is this composite event (comprising a showerhead, 02:34; an embrace, 02:36; a smug smile 02:37) which motivates the storyboard of events and character changes that precede and follow it in the chronology of the video.

The video opens with Spears assuming the role of a futuristic air stewardess, whose disguise allows her to approach the holder of a key to a secret research facility. Notably, the initially unattractive male character is also in disguise; in a play of identity typical of recent science fiction, his facial mask is peeled away by the stewardess to reveal a ruggedly handsome male (played by actor Matt Felker). The two exchange favors in a "mile-high" lavatory after which the wily stewardess

emerges with her reward, the passenger with a smile. The female protagonist then morphs into a second character, characterized by Spears in the “making of” documentary as a “red-haired hot mamma,” who hitches a motorcycle ride (with muscular actor Tyson Beckford) through the streets of a digitally simulated Paris-by-night before arriving at a high-tech research lab, where she procures a vial of poison (hence “toxic”). While breaking out of the lab she acrobatically negotiates a cylindrical passage protected by laser-triggered alarms. All of this happens during the techno-inflected extended middle eight, at the end of which Spears karate-chops her way through a series of glass screens. The trauma of this act brings about a flashback of the act of betrayal that has evidently motivated the narrative. Vocoded vocals and shattered glass provide the build up to a second character transition, this coinciding with a reprise of the song’s chorus. A third character, this time dark-haired, is like its predecessor a composite of futuristic female warrior types. Cartoon-like neo-noir Spears scales the wall of a building with sci-fi suction pads in order to seduce the man from the shower before administering the poison he evidently deserves. In sync with the final beats of the song, this character dramatically dives out of a window and morphs back into the cheeky stewardess, thus bringing narrative closure. A fourth character might be termed Britney the pop goddess; back-lit, once again, Spears, wearing glued-on jewelry and little else, adopts poses resembling those of a lap dancer in clips interpolated with each of the other sections. These are generally synchronized with the hook of the song and, on two occasions, the prominent violin motif. Their function would seem to be to cement the relationship between these characters and “the actor” Britney Spears, thus allowing some of their attributes to be more effortlessly mapped onto the star.

The narrative of the video is strongly musically driven. This is evident from the flashback sequence discussed above, but also in the opening section of the video, in which sinking glissando figures in the strings are closely synchronized with the visual montage. These slippery musical figures bring into play well-established connotations of exotic otherness and eroticism and, moreover, serve as the primary musical agent that allows a digitally enhanced tracking shot god-like access to various camera vantage points. Thus, in measure two, the exotic strings sound as an upward tilt bring a futuristic aircraft into sight. In measure four, strings are heard again as the omniscient camera passes from the aircraft’s exterior to its interior (00:05). In measure six, the same motif accompanies the effortless passage of the camera through a small aperture (or, more aptly, a peep-hole) separating the cockpit from the cabin (00:08). And in measure eight, Spears as stewardess raises an air phone to her lips, thus signaling the transition from the instrumental introduction to the first verse of the song (00:13). Each of these transitions is strongly backlit by sunlight: initially behind the aircraft; then emerging from the peephole; finally, from a window at the rear of the aircraft. This provides visual continuity but more importantly invokes lighting conventions from noir, which reinforce the content of the lyric portraying the female protagonist as a *femme fatale*. This is most evident in a dramatic three-quarter



**Figure 1** Toxic: Exotic Violin Motif (Authors' Transcription) (Music by C. Dennis, C. Karlsson, P. Winnberg and H. Jonback)

shadow close up accompanying the word “dangerous” (00:21), the final syllable of which falls on the unstable seventh degree of the minor scale.

The violin motif (see Figure 1) is heard throughout the video, but in narrative terms most prominently at about its center-point (01:49), as biker Spears shrieks with uninhibited joy from the back seat of her mount (the strings simulate the sound of her voice), and at its end, as violins become the liminal agent that allows neo-noir Spears to morph back into the stewardess (03:16). We will return in more detail below to the question of musical exoticism, but it should be noted here that the violin (or *Kaman*) motif has a distinct Arabic character. The combination of fast tempo, “exotic” intervallic characteristics resembling those in the Arabic *Maqam* (including augmented seconds and tritones:  $f\#$  to  $e\flat$  and  $d$ ), ornamentation, nasal timbral characteristics, the absence of harmony, and the use of sinking glissandos all leave little doubt in this regard, although references to Bollywood strings in the album credits might lead interpretations elsewhere. In the context of post-9/11 aviation, however, the presence of Arabic-sounding strings synced with both textual and visual references to danger, including shots of a jet aircraft flying low over urban terrain and a woman jumping out of a building, mobilizes a specific set of connotations whose embeddedness in the current climate of racially marked paranoia in the United States is hard to ignore.

The macrostructure of the video is also characterized by close audiovisual relations. Spears as stewardess is enacted during the first verse and chorus, red-haired Spears during the second. The acrobatic laser dance (a gaming and action movie cliché) takes place during an eight-plus-four measure bridge, after which a reprise of the chorus coincides with the song's dramatic denouement: the revenge murder of the unfaithful lover by “bitchy black-haired” Spears (Spears qtd in “MTV's ‘Making’”).

### Words, Pictures, and Music

The distribution of music, pictures, and words highlights a number of categories in the video's function that require close inspection and further commentary. While the refrain consists of identical lyrics, verses A and B differ. (See Table 1, cues in lyrics.) From start to finish, patterns of melodic and harmonic repetition are transported by the steady groove in an overall process that establishes structural key centers and

cadence points. The musical events that stand out and function as building blocks for the composition consist of the exotic string sweeps, the jagged bass line, the drum pattern, and the guitar solo. All these musical features coalesce with the lyrics and picture frames of Spears.

In the recording of the song "Toxic," Spears surfs a wave of sound that helps construct a bridge between fantasy and personal narrative: she knows what she wants (and certainly knows what the producer wants) and sets out to convince the fans of this through her performance. The lyrics of the song, as much as the musical codes, are conveyed in a variety of ways, which can be grasped through a method that does a lot more than just separate the content from context. If anything, lyrics provide us with material for gauging the responses to artists and their songs, a point Frith has persistently argued. Most fascinating is how words in their juxtapositioning with music provide a stimulus for suggesting things we can say about the song and artist. Let us consider this assertion with some specific examples.

The function of phrasing and gesture in "Toxic" is a very different kind of experience *until* we see the song through the video. Almost immediately we witness a visual performance with all the edits, angles, and shots as the phrasing of the music undergoes a significant transformation. Take the opening phrase, "Baby can't you see I'm calling," which follows the eight-bar string motif (00:14). In full air-stewardess regalia, Spears faces the camera head on, delivering this phrase down the cabin intercom phone. Without needing to spell out the connotations of the telephone in this opening scene, it is the intensity of her "look" that is remarkable: heavy black mascara and eyeliner magnify her dark eyes against the strictly pulled back blonde peroxide hair, framed by large dangling silver ear-rings and cap. All the trademarks of camp are there in an instant. It only takes seconds before the uniformed-Spears gives way to the private-Britney, with hair down, lighter make-up, almost totally naked, posing as a pin-up girl. The seductiveness of this shot is accompanied by the phrase, "Should wear a warning" (00:18). In terms of the musical arrangement, which includes synthesizers, bass, drum patterns, and strings, there is an overall cushioning of the spectacle of Spears in erotic pose. The connection between language, imagery, and music is significant in that it establishes a narrative of eroticism that is identified through performativity. The choice of the word "Toxic" underlines a number of strategies at play, especially in the phrase, "Don't you know that you're toxic," which Britney draws on to pursue her sexual pleasures in the name of revenge. In the lyrics that unfold we discover that Spears' response to the male threat is articulated in an erotic manner that can be associated with forms of self-love. Put differently, the lyrics provide a framework for talking about control in a way that links eroticism very closely to questions of sexual agency. By identifying the male protagonist as toxic, Spears becomes just as toxic, and the interconnectedness between her own different constructions in the video verifies her strategy of empowerment through camp play. Spears' form of "girl camp" then is a result of how the words, pictures, and music coalesce.<sup>9</sup> The pleasure factor in all this is intended to have a resounding impact on a majority of viewers. Playfulness and 'camping it up' becomes a mechanism by which

to give the viewer a means to identify with Spears, to have fun in being a fan, to laugh, to chuckle with joy, without feeling too threatened by the role that is played out in the video. Humor in the lyrics and images therefore allows room for distancing, and, as Julia Kristeva has insisted, laughing is a signifying practice, a lifting of inhibitions.

Another feature worth noting throughout the video is Spears' response to the groove. In the B section, as she sings the phrase, "Too high can't come down," she syncs up with the other stewardesses behind her in a nifty little dance routine that is executed through exaggerated arm and hand movements and a wiggle of the bottom (00:41). In this brief moment of respite, her acknowledgement of the rhythmic pulse becomes a send-up of the Hollywood musical chorus-line. This gesture is enhanced by a change in vocal timbre. A sense of falsetto on the words "too high" emphasizes the affected nature of her queering. And, in the next phrase, hot and eager she tells us that she is losing her head, an act that is certainly realized when she pours poison down the throat of her ex-lover, played by actor Martin Henderson, in the bedroom scene at the close of the video. Here the musical phrasing, resulting in closure through sex and death, transports the words "intoxicate me now with your lovin' now" through a loop consisting of four-beat, single-bar units (03:06). Heightened by incessant repetition, the intensity of this moment is captured by the word "now" hitting the fourth beat. Traditionally referred to as one of the weak beats in quadruple time in music analysis, the effect of this is significant on a number of counts. Cunningly, the heavy accent on this beat overcharges it to the extent it becomes felt as a strong anticipated first beat. The effect of this is a kind of musical foreplay that exchanges weakness for dominance in rhythmic patterning. Moreover, the accent on the word "now" at the end of each phrase induces a sense of contrived rhyme. Indeed, the intention to rhyme serves to pulverize the beat with unmistakable precision and malice. In counterpoint to this, the exotically toxic violins make one final appearance as Spears is positioned back where she started from in the cabin of the plane all neat and proper. The final visual code of being "in-flight" once again comprises a large wink, which not coincidentally falls on the first beat of a sound-less measure (03:18);<sup>10</sup> a gesture that is intended to invite a degree of camped-up affectation for its reception. In the composition of this video clip, a vast collection of markers spells out the lyrical, musical, and visual configuration. An extensive draping of the visual narrative accompanies the sound of Spears' voice, the groove patterns, the bass part, and the exotic strings. Negotiation is thus instigated on many fronts to enable an audience to enter at different points. All in all, the musical arrangement and its digital manipulation mediate the visual narrative along a continuum that begs further consideration of genealogy.

### **Audiovisual Genealogies and Agentic Narration**

So far our line of argument seeks to insist that interpretation relies heavily on the recognition of character types, narrative conventions, and audiovisual techniques that



can be traced to cinematic genres.<sup>11</sup> The distinctive audiovisual identity of “Toxic” results, therefore, from the cross-generic transportation of these aspects into the established narrative domain of the music video. As noted above, the plot of the video revolves around four main character types, each of which resembles representations in current circulation.

Beginning with dark-haired Spears, the twangy, echo-rich guitar in the chorus sections, sandwiched between the hook, “don’t you know that you’re toxic,” draws on a genealogy that broadly invokes spy suspense and spaghetti Western genres, but more specifically points to empowered female protagonists operating within the context of neo-noir. Notable examples include Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*, and Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* (1989–1990).<sup>12</sup> A host of musical reference points can be identified, ranging from guitarists Duane Eddy and Hank Marvin to the surf punk sound, all of which point to a transgressive coolness that is not averse to ironic play or the hedonistic excesses of beach and club culture.

Black-haired Spears has much in common with *Pulp Fiction*’s Mia (Uma Thurman), but it is the migration of the neo-noir *femme fatale* to science fiction and action genres that offers perhaps the most fruitful point of reference. The genealogy of such characters extends back at least to *Bladerunner* and the “Alien Quadrilogy,” both of which feature soundtracks in which the use of electronic sounds is prominent.<sup>13</sup> The character of Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) from the latter provided the mould for many subsequent fighting females operating within the science fiction genre. More recently, gaming-heroine-turned-screen-star Lara Croft offers perhaps the closest approximation to the characters in “Toxic.” In the context of television, Max from *Dark Angel* and Sydney Bristow from *Alias* (both undoubtedly modeled on Lara Croft) are equally salient intertextual touchstones. In all of the above, electronic dance music is an integral component in portraying heroines as active (even *hyper-active*) while drawing on the posthuman aura of the cyborg, which is effectively mapped onto the non-human qualities of the *femme fatale*.<sup>14</sup> Spears, like Lara Croft and *Dark Angel*’s Max leaps acrobatically from buildings and staves off foes with stylized martial arts moves. These women are not always stronger than the men they come up against but they invariably know how to out-manuever them. Thus, red-haired Spears chops and kicks her way out of a futuristic research lab to the accompaniment of a techno break furnished with vocoded vocals; this action closely resembles a scene featuring a red-haired alias of Sydney Bristow (series 1, episode 2), whose spectacular fighting is also accompanied by frenzied techno music and who visits many exotic locations similar to those depicted in *Toxic*, including Paris and Japan. *Dark Angel*’s Max rides a motorcycle, as does red-haired Spears. Isomorphisms in plot and character are too numerous to mention, all of which works to conjure up a field of connotations that delineate with some precision the character of the female heroine: her style, her motives, her ethics. More specifically, in *Dark Angel*, exotic marking of the title music—a short vocal sample featuring Arabic-styled ornamentation—casts the female protagonist in no uncertain terms as ethnically other, perhaps Arabic. An examination of the

implications of analogous musical procedures in the bridge section of “Toxic” will be provided below.

To understand the motivation for the incorporation of these character types, it is helpful to return to writing on personal narrative. Figures such as these are accommodated in McAdams’s theory of personal narrative by way of the concept of “imagoes,” which describes the panoply of “exaggerated and one-dimensional” personae adopted by narrators as heroes in their self-narratives (122). Imagoes provide a narrative mechanism for accommodating fragmented subjectivity by allowing “an individual to resolve the problem of simultaneously being the many and the one.” The function of these everyday performances is in many respects similar to the “theatrical” performances discussed here: Spears’ characters may be adopted “in fun” but they nevertheless embody tacit aspirations of their host. The imagoes in *Toxic* serve, therefore, as performative personae that negotiate a representational field traversing characterization and reality—they are not one or the other. Indeed, it can be argued that, by dressing herself up in these disguises, Spears reveals more about personal motivation and subjective struggle than might be the case had she reverted to straightforward confessional strategies. All four characters in *Toxic* are what McAdams calls “agentic:” they exhibit heightened agentic characteristics, being “aggressive, ambitious, assertive, autonomous, clever, courageous, daring, dominant” (134). This contrasts with the “ordinary” self, which in the case of conventional models of the feminine is all too often bereft of these qualities (134). As the singer herself comments, what these characters have in common is that they all “go through men to get what they want” (“MTV’s ‘Making’”)—which is true. Even the saucy stewardess seems to end up on top, mechanically going through the motions of conventional femininity, coldly kissing children and shimmying down the aisle in slapstick comedic fashion, all the time with her own “higher” goals in mind. There seems little doubt that the star would wish to be perceived in a similar way: making superficial concessions to a tainted music industry but securing something more valuable (commercial and artistic) in the process. Spears needs imagoes, with their heightened sense of agency, in order to counterbalance perceptions of her former self, which was widely regarded as lacking these qualities. Reception is complex in the case of such an obviously polysemic text, but it would be naïve to underestimate the power of straightforward scopophilic pleasures in the context of traditional patterns of reception. Even Lara Croft, empowered though she is, wages war on the patriarchal establishment while at the same time offering the titillation of a garter belt doubling as a gun holster, not to mention the ambivalent appeal of the dominatrix. Spears’ personae are similarly open to contradictory decodings.

### **Music-Visual Structuration through the Voice**

Spears’ vocal articulation represents an extension of and commentary on her earlier music. The singer’s sound was established already in “Baby One More Time,” in the verses of which her R & B-styled melismas repeatedly weave their way down though a timbrally contracted middle register in search of a fuller, more sensuous lower

register. In this and other early songs, the singer's whiny vowel sounds, guttural groans, and lingering liquid phonemes signify both immaturity and eroticism, as do the accompanying visual representations. She had not always sung in this way: early film footage (included on *Time Out*) shows the precocious twelve-year-old singer as the bearer of a powerful, timbrally rounded voice that bears all the hallmarks of voice training for the theatre and concert hall: voice production characterized by a low laryngeal position and controlled breathing.<sup>15</sup> On her first album, however, she discarded this sound in favor of techniques favored in recent "girly" pop. If the biographical evidence suggests that vocal technique for Spears is "not that innocent," a caveat should be noted. The evidence of audiovisual performances strongly suggests that the singer suffers from a speech impediment. Spears produces liquid phonemes with an extended movement of the tongue beginning with the teeth and upper lips rather than the alveolar ridge or palate of the mouth. She also appears to have a slight lisp, producing sibilants further forward in the mouth than is usual. Consequently, the star shows a good deal more tongue than one might expect. Her vocal sound is fuller when it comes to liquid phonemes but also markedly "younger," since speech impediments are usually overcome as the speaker ages. Spears' distinctive speech physiology is of little interest in itself. It becomes an issue only when mediation of her voice—either by the singer herself or by video directors—begins to signify. This question is best illuminated through two examples. Spears' vocal style already draws attention towards visible sites of production, but in *Baby One More Time* the directorial gaze seems obsessed with the singer's distinctive voice production, which could also be heard as a marker of immaturity, in one case zooming in for a close up of the open mouth. In *Toxic* directorial intervention is generally less obvious, although the line "taste of your lips" calls attention to the issue on two occasions: in both the opening sequence and the murder scene close-ups of tonguing on the word "lips" indexically refer the viewer to the singer's lips, with all of the connotations this referentiality implies. The line "It's getting late" (01:25), at the beginning of the biker sequence, also finds Spears in close-up profile, as if to exploit the mechanics and erotics of the stars' unusual voice production.

In "Toxic," Spears expands her repertory of vocal techniques, employing five distinctive tropes, which, as well as functioning expressively, delineate the structure of the song.

1. In the first section of the verses (A: see Table 1) and the opening lines of choruses (C), we hear Spears' trademark R & B-inflected groaning voice with contracted mid-register. The sound is similar to Christina Aguilera and Beyonce but without the powerful virtuosity that characterizes these singers' voices and somewhat more in the way of stylistic affectation. The combination of close miking and reduced expenditure of air results in an aural simulation of intimacy that has become almost compulsory in pop performances of this type. This has led some commentators to characterize her dominant voice type as "soubrette," although the resemblance to the operatic designation is fairly superficial.<sup>16</sup>

2. In the B sections, the singer makes, for her, unprecedented use of the falsetto or head voice. Furnished with softening glissandos and indistinct intonation, this voice, which we recognize from Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" and much of the recent hi-NRG-derived erotic pop (most notably, Kylie Minogue), this voice seems designed to connote a fluffy femininity flecked with erotic abandon. The lyrics and visuals both reinforce this impression: Spears sings "too high can't come down, it's in the air and it's all around" while elevating herself to a standing position on the seat of a motorcycle. Like the rodeo simulations employed on Madonna's *Drowned World Tour*, the bike serves as a prop for eroticized display. The sonic, linguistic, and visual articulations found in this section coalesce therefore to signify a general sense of heady abandon for which addiction is an apt expression.
3. In the choruses (C), the singer alternates between the falsetto voice and an edgier, post-punk singing style. This manner of articulation is also new for Spears and represents a concerted attempt to harden her image. Here vibrato-free vocal production, in which a more substantial passage of air (a "chest voice") is checked slightly in the throat rather than the base of the tongue, invokes the singing of Avril Lavigne, Alanis Morissette and, in the retro-punk mode of recent albums, Madonna. The lyrics and visuals support this edgier style: here she sings "I'm addicted to you don't you know that you're toxic" while staring squarely into the camera. Double-tracking of the voice in these phrases helps toughen their timbral characteristics.
4. In terms of the technological manipulation, there are resonances in the music video for Madonna's catchy hit, "Music," from 2000, which drew on aspects of digitalized animation. This has not been without its influence on a spate of pop videos that have followed. Cartoon representations of Madonna position her amid a cityscape with buildings bearing the names of her greatest hits in neon lights. In a bid to move on, the cartoon figure of Madonna attempts to destroy some of the lit-up signs, as the song, all about music, becomes symbolic of Madonna's promotion of her own music. The important point here is that self-invention and transformation are the key ingredients in all Madonna's visual displays, which make her iconic status as polyvalent as it is. In no uncertain terms, the musical genre of *Toxic* corresponds directly to the high gloss of video productions, such as *Music*. Thus, all the indicators for a perfect production are discernible in the presence of techniques that airbrush the recording. Enhanced and animated through the prominence of voice filters, vocoder audio plug-ins, and state-of-art software, the voice occupies center stage. The recording consists of a wash of vocal strands that titillate at the same time as they impress. Indeed, it is the exceptional degree of technological manipulation that vividly emphasizes the link between Spears' roles that border on a cyborg cartoon-type character. The identification of Spears' star identity and the cyborg diva she plays seems to propose a clash between her "real" voice and the more cyborg one. This is not dissimilar to the vocoding of Madonna's voice in "Music" and Cher's voice in the song "Believe."<sup>17</sup>In much the same way, Spears' vocals are digitalized to evoke a multiplicity of the self through the body. Her assumed identity in the recording of *Toxic* embraces many of the associations we have with animated soundtracks that impinge on the representation of the body through the aid of technology. Spears' animated voice fulfills the function of negotiating female presence. And, while her sonic and visual fetishization of the digitalized, animated woman certainly panders to the desires of the mainstream gaze, it does not stop there. At any rate, the type of sonic iconography represented here appropriates the perfection and

fakery of pop, which conveys a playfulness that symbolizes parody. By this we are reminded that production techniques in pop are inevitably grounded in the politics of fantasy; Spears' performance is toxic because of an overdose of technical virtuosity that sculpts her as an aural and visual spectacle depleted of human characteristics.

5. In section D, Spears (or perhaps the song's composer, Cathy Dennis, who is attributed as a backing vocalist on "Toxic") sings a wordless descending line onto the tonic (G-G $\flat$ -E $\flat$ -C) that is heavily treated with reverb. The manner of articulation is similar to the Donna Summer voice but with more of a nasal quality that is vaguely suggestive of Arabic and South Asian musical styles. The Orientalist nature of the music is reinforced by microtonal embellishments preceding the second quarter-note of the pattern, which is built from the same modal materials as the Arabic strings. Here the most distinctive feature is the augmented second drop between the seventh and "minor" sixth degrees of the mode. This feature has been a stock signifier of exotic otherness in Western music since Romanticism, representing everything from gypsy music to Arabic and South Asian musical traditions (Scott 167).<sup>18</sup> It would be missing the point to attempt to distill from this music actual geographical points of reference, as it would to attempt to reconcile the music, in real terms, with the accompanying images, which depict an American woman engaging in martial arts appropriated from Japanese culture. In the context of the Western imagination, however, the cluster of connotations mobilized here is entirely consistent and familiar: the combination of an alluring yet threatening female character who visibly and audibly partakes of "Oriental" qualities plays on stereotypes that have long been available to composers of dramatic music (everything from *Carmen* to the Dance of the Seven Veils). Here it casts Spears as someone who dares to overstep the bounds of the familiar, in much same way as the overdriven synthetic bass of this section oversteps some tacit yet frequently inscribed threshold. The effectiveness of both is premised on conventions that install the bounds of the acceptable while reveling in the intoxication transgression brings. It is not insignificant that in Spears' penultimate transformation, signaled by her own Orientalist incantations, she takes on the problematic identity of the black-haired "bitch." This character, who is quantifiably the nastiest of the bunch, coldheartedly commits murder while looking and *sounding* Arabic. Moreover, this seems like a natural state of affairs: consider, for example, the incongruous possibility of the murder being perpetrated by the blond stewardess. What this tells us about signifying practices at the beginning of the new millennium gives pause for thought, although here, as elsewhere in the video, the dominant representational strategy is parody. Moreover, it is clear that this and other representations in the video are part of a liberal-revisionist project, which, even while it invokes connotations of "dark" otherness, does so in the context of a storyboard that makes identification with the heroine more than likely.

### Gendered Queering

What becomes apparent in the video *Toxic* is the problematics of sexualization in representation, which, in turn, raises questions linked to the new "girlie culture" that has taken a provocative stance against feminism.<sup>19</sup> With the purpose of entertaining, Spears imitates the erotic construction of the *femme fatale* by drawing on many of the genealogies we have already addressed. Spears is constructed as a multiple identity

who reinvents herself through her relationship with others at the same time as she confirms a classic fetishistic mission. In this framework, the link between the female and technology symbolizes a mechanized, cyborg form of eroticism. Via computerized effects, Spears' femaleness is so exaggerated that she queers the fixity of femininity in a spin that serves as a parody of the natural. All through the video she is so camped up in all her representations that she becomes knotted up in a closed circuit of sexual desire and unabashed narcissism. What then are the implications of Spears' hypersexualized imagery and how does this organize gender? And to what extent does the music queer such representation?<sup>20</sup>

The most memorable moments of queering in *Toxic* are where the posthuman quality of her imagery flirts with the dissolution of gender by alienating it from an assumed essence. For the purpose of this discussion, the term "queering" refers to the politics of a performance that encourages queer viewing. So our point is that what we call Spears' "queering of gender" is a strategy that mobilizes a parody of "normative" gender through representations that are constantly changing. Her "queering" offers up wider opportunities for identification than those associated with more standard pop videos. Queering is about performance, play, and spectacle, which destabilizes subject positions.<sup>21</sup> However, that Spears' burden of embodiment is so animated and aggrandized means her performance easily settles back into the constructedness of stereotypical categorization.

Visually and socially, there is an obvious element of drag in progress that destabilizes through the diva's charade. Spears' roles in the video might be read as intentionally superficial and inscribed in the fantasy that is acted out. But this is only part of the story as we witness a fantasy where the pop diva fashions herself as an imitation of an original, which is parodied in order to be provocative and challenge. No better is this demonstrated than in her role as air-stewardess (note that we deliberately avoid the more politically correct form, "flight attendant," here), where Spears mocks a relatively low status, albeit glamorous, profession that has prided itself on good service and beautiful young women. At the same time this profession has been plagued by sexism. Spears' impersonation of the stewardess in *Toxic* builds on countless narratives in cinematic history where the female literally bends over backwards to serve and please all who fly with her. Of course, with this comes an element of control, which Spears' character decides to capitalize on as she loses little time in realizing when she drags her object of desire into the toilet tearing his mask off. Certainly, the symbolism of this scene can prompt various readings. If we draw in Paul Gilroy's discourse on the racialized biopolitics of fucking (Gilroy 88), there are critical questions here that one can apply to emancipation and white female empowerment, not least through the technologization of the erotic. The signification of the white female body politic cannot be detached from cultural production and distinctive sexual stereotypes in pop. In considering the political effects of music, sound, and text, Gilroy identifies the increasing command of "specularity over aurality." This, Gilroy claims, places pressure on "representations of the exemplary racial body arrested in the gaze of desiring and identifying subjects" (Gilroy 93, 94).

In the case of Spears' texts, they register many changes in white female representation during the past decade. Most discernible is the break between older patterns of representation, where the female's role would usually be more subservient. In pop videos, such as *Toxic*, sex takes over from narratives of love, as new rules are quickly established. As evidenced by Spears' videos, there is a sense that the pop song has been allocated the role of soundtrack for the purpose of filling out the image and visual narrative. New trends have fixed the rules differently in a context where musical expression specifies that the person performing is mainly identified in terms of his or her body. In these circumstances, the desire to be desirable is closely linked with the desire to appear to be free, and, in the case of many female artists, emancipated and empowered. In other words, their hermeneutic agency is grounded in a strategy of playing around with erotic codes and queering them, which can be linked to a politics of representation where gender becomes the rationality for striving for freedom. The theatricality of *Toxic* alone symbolizes a queering of femininity on many different levels: it signifies a platform for self-promotion at the same time as it appropriates heteronormative sexual desire. In other words, Spears' video is as much in the name of entertainment as it is gay or Other.

Thus, when it comes to gender stereotypes and sex in video representations and how these are experienced, there is an abundance of strong connotations of race and sexuality that solicit different kinds of identification. Heteronormative whiteness indeed provides a recipe for a brand of authenticity that is desirable at the same time as it is deceptive. In the case of white, straight (especially blond) female stars the perpetuating representation of gender and its playfulness or queering with sex contributes to a stability of racial particularity. Spears' performativity, in this light, is a slickly stylized and overtly conservative celebration of heterosexual desire that extends the coherence and symmetrical shape of gender into an ordered narrative of racial being. In effect then, the reality is that *Toxic* is not as toxic as it might like us to imagine it to be. For one thing, the video marks the MTV community as a space of heterosexual activity as well as a verification of the exclusivity of race: an act that is characterized by entertainment and fun-loving significance. Moreover, the embodied signs of beautiful white, light-skinned Hispanic and light black or brown females, with perfect European features, yield insights into the battles still going on in the black public sphere. The point here is that the signification of the politics of black representation in MTV culture cannot be divorced from that which characterizes white artists, such as the big earners, Britney Spears, Madonna, Christina Aguilera, Justin Timberlake, and Gwen Stefani. Indeed, the patterned representations of hip-hop, rap, and soul videos featuring black artists reveal a lot about the trends and changing qualities of the white vernacular. There can be little doubt that the proliferation of humor and queering antics in Spears' *Toxic* work differently from that of Snoop Doggy Dogg, NWA, SWV, and R. Kelly. The point we are arriving at is that the technologies that organize music and bodies in vastly different ways also solicit corporeal forms of identification that can manipulate and create events of cultural performance. At any rate, the political effects of queering are invariably

contradictory and exemplified by the ways in which music is communicated through sound, text, and image; the significance of this cannot be overstated. How then do the traits of scopophilia and the erotics of desire differ from one artist to the next, and how does this link up to the categories of identification that deal with gender, race, and sexuality?

Associations with autonomous agency and sexual desire promote a symbolic exercise of power, which in the case of Spears' hypersexualized role in *Toxic* could be read as a flamboyant attempt to give head to the mechanical and, thereby, reconfigure the sexual. Indeed, the fetishization of such an idealized female body cannot be blown away no matter how much we read the video as queered or "cyberfied," for there is little doubt that videos such as this offer up an important challenge for the musicologist bent on addressing the role of the pop performer.

Conceptually, we might consider that the codes of femininity Spears appropriates are arbitrary; they uphold no essence of femaleness. Rather they are codes that are assembled socio-culturally with clichéd gender-oriented connotations. From this we can deduce that the narrative strategies of female control, scopophilia, and sexual display in pop videos largely compensate for a narrative that addresses vulnerability in love, as Spears waxes lyrically, "I'm addicted to you/Don't you know that you're toxic." In the end, her performance of gender retroactively confirms the illusion of an inner gender core, as she ritualizes a repetition of conventions that have been enforced by compulsory heterosexuality.

For the most part, as we have suggested, Spears' strategies are inherited directly from Madonna who undoubtedly cleared the way for the next generation of female pop stars. At the dawn of a post-Madonna era of pop, the issue of the female as confident sexual agent has much to do with females asserting their own desires, an aspect of popular feminism that has not been without its problems.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, it could be argued that Spears' drive and her gradual development of a strategy of queering can be credited to the idea that Madonna popularized, namely that identity is not fixed and therefore can be transgressed. There can be no doubt that Spears has started to reinvent herself, which is no better exemplified than in the video *Toxic*, where the question of who is the "real" Spears really starts surfacing. *Femme fatale*, dirty teenager, bible-promoting virgin? Spears has begun pushing her career forward by the antics of queering, reinvention, and reconstruction. Perhaps the important question after all this is: what qualifies Spears' act as political if we are in agreement it is queer? One reply would be that the musical rhetoric of her performances rests in its ability to articulate the body through different gestures. And, as we have attempted to point out, it is these gestures that are characterized by correspondences to culture, gender, class, ethnicity, and so on.

## Conclusion

Intoxicating though it might be the audiovisual potion that is *Toxic* is ineluctably laced with traces of its mediation, something we have attempted to start unraveling.



In a genealogical play that is sophisticated yet disturbingly familiar, Britney Spears is projected through the words, sounds, and images of this song. In the video, she works hard to attract and hold the collective gaze of an audience whose attention can never be counted on in an increasingly competitive pop marketplace. Careering towards a more hard-edged image that ostensibly contrasts with no longer tenable representations of the teen star, an impressive cast of cinematic and sonic protagonists is brought into play to assist the star in the pursuit of her high-flying goals. Ironic distance notwithstanding, the evidence based upon her reception would suggest that personal agency is still the main trump card when it comes to questions of pop *auteur* status, a quality that continues to be valued highly among artists and audiences.





Bearing this in mind, we are reminded that the pop performer is the result of a complex structure of mediation in our everyday lives. Even while the prime incentive is to market the artist's music for commercial gain, it is the eroticized body, with all its countless connotations, that is pulled to the fore. During this process, music's effect is communicated aurally and visually in dialogic relationships where musical style is always a signifying practice.

In sum, then, how Spears performs in her pop videos reveals the ideological representations of contemporary society, and begs us to consider how styles represent gender and sexuality in the here and now. In consequence, Spears' act is typified by a double-codedness that subverts at the same time it inscribes. We might say that her authorial intention is staged through reception and then interpretation within a cultural and historical context. MTV has really permitted us to get close to our pop idols, and as a consequence performances employ any number of devices to subvert the spectator's pleasure. Pleasure in the space of negotiation or exchange empowers and provides us with an active role in reading the text. Mostly, the transgression of fixed categories through queering can permit us to open up new fields of subjectivities and spaces for play. That the spectacle of *Toxic* gives rise to gendered codes that are problematic at the same time as they are entertaining is reason enough for investigating why such forms of musical representation are always so compelling and therefore worthy of study.

### **Acknowledgments**

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**Table 1** Lyrics, Music, and Visual Action in *Toxic* (dir. Joseph Kahn)

Time Code/Form	Cues in Lyrics	Key Musical Cues	Synopsis of Visual Action
<b>00:00 Intro</b> 		4 × exotic violin motif with rhythmic introductory phrase in initial measure followed by descending glissandos as groove starts up. Riffing on C min (i).	Upward tilt to sci-fi jet. Forward track through aircraft's windscreen and peephole to BS as stewardess. Glissandos coincide with visual transitions.
<b>00:13 (A) Verse 1 Section 1</b> 	Baby, can't you see I'm calling [...] <i>The remainder of the verse comprises references to a dangerous relationship and loss of control.</i>	<i>R&amp;B styled "soubrette" voice: contracted mid-register, guttural groans, breathiness.</i> Use of vocal effects, suggestive of vocoding. i – bIII – V – i Cadence onto violin motif.	StwBS sings into airphone while preparing refreshment trolley/ cross-cut to pinup BS. Gestures are high-camp, the look defies the male-gaze, and StwBS parodies the role of her profession, both as air stewardess and pop star.
<b>00:27 (A) Verse 1 Section 1</b> 	There's no escape I can't hide [...] <i>The singer relates the addictive qualities of the song's subject.</i>	<i>R&amp;B styled "soubrette" voice.</i> Subtle changes to the technological manipulation of the voice within the mix. i – bIII – V – i Cadence onto violin motif.	StwBS spills champagne over unattractive male passenger accidentally-on-purpose; suggestively cleans it up/more cross-cuts to glossy, soft-focus pinup BS.
<b>00:40 (B) Verse 1 Section 2</b> 	Too high Can't come down [...] <i>The singer describes her state of subjective disorientation.</i>	<i>Falsetto voice: soft "girlie" tone, indistinct intonation, glissandos.</i> i – bIII – V – i Cadence onto violin motif.	Stewardesses' camp dance routine/ passengers exaggerated moves in time with music. Choreography is aligned to musical style in a way that accents the audio-visual symbiosis.

**Table 1** Continued








Time Code/Form	Cues in Lyrics	Key Musical Cues	Synopsis of Visual Action
<p><b>00:54 (C) Chorus 1</b></p> 	<p><i>Sexually suggestive allusions to the singer's lips and to the act of riding.</i> [...]I'm addicted to you Don't you know that you're toxic [...]</p>	<p><i>Falsetto voice reverting to hard, post-punk style for "toxic" hook: no vibrato, double-tracked.</i> Twang guitar alternates with iterations of hook. i – bIII7 – II7 – bII – i – bIII7 (false dominant) – bVI – vm7 – bII7 – i Cadence onto violin motif.</p>	<p>StwBS pushes unattractive male into lavatory, kisses him, pulls off mask to reveal attractive fair-haired male. Simulated sex; stwBS takes key from man's pocket. He smiles. Again the scene is slapstick, playful, and sexually provocative, highlighting the rhetoric of conventional gender roles.</p>
<p><b>01:24 (A) Verse 2/sect.1 Section 1</b></p> 	<p>It's getting late, To give you up[...] <i>References to the devil and a poisonous potion the singer has become hooked on.</i></p>	<p><i>R&amp;B styled "soubrette" voice.</i> i – bIII – V – i Cadence onto violin motif with rising glissandos.</p>	<p>Shots of BS as red-haired biker chick, being driven through simulated Paris-by-night by muscular black male. Issues of race and empowerment are played out (read: problematized) from many perspectives.</p>
<p><b>01:37 (B) Verse 2 Section 2</b></p> 	<p>Too high Can't come down [...]</p>	<p><i>Falsetto voice.</i> Voice comes across more parodic each time this verse recurs. i – bIII – V – i Cadence onto violin motif.</p>	<p>RHBS rises on bike to sing line "too high"/cross-cuts to pinup BS. Violin glissandos synched with RHBS screeching with joy, while the drum samples slot into a groove that affords this shot a high deal of rhythmic propensity.</p>

Table 1 Continued

Time Code/Form	Cues in Lyrics	Key Musical Cues	Synopsis of Visual Action
01:51 (C) Chorus 2 	[...] I'm addicted to you Don't you know that you're toxic [...] <i>Wordless singing</i>	<i>Falsetto voice -&gt; post-punk style for "toxic" hook.</i> Twang guitar alternates with iterations of hook. Drum samples are pushed up in the mix, with stronger accents on the down-beats, creating a sense of thrusting. Cadence onto violin motif.	RHBS breaks into research facility/ cross-cuts of pinup BS. Angry RHBS retrieves vial of poison; walks out through slide doors marked "Toxic." Vengeance is highlighted by the heightening of effects in the music, especially through use of compression.
02:21 (D) Bridge 		<i>Falsetto voice with heavy reverb; nasal quality, exotic ornamentation, augmented 2<sup>nd</sup> interval.</i> vocal line (g – g <sup>b</sup> – e <sup>b</sup> – c) over pumping eighth-note bass pattern, techno sound.	Acrobatic dance in laser room/cross-cuts to betrayal flashback (dark male and woman in shower). RHBS kicks through glass panel. The aggression of this scene is a spoof on female action thrillers, such as Charlie's Angels, etc.
02:38 (C) Chorus 3 	[...] I'm addicted to you Don't you know that you're toxic [...]	<i>Vocoded voice -&gt; falsetto -&gt; post-punk style for "toxic" hook.</i> Twang guitar alternates with iterations of hook. Cadence onto violin motif.	Cut to pinup BS for "taste of your lips"; then to black-haired BS, who ascends building with suction pads; seduces dark male (from flashback); throws to floor and straddles him.

**Table 1** Continued

Time Code/Form	Cues in Lyrics	Key Musical Cues	Synopsis of Visual Action
<p><b>03:04 Coda</b></p> 	<p>Intoxicate me now With your lovin' now [...]</p>	<p><i>Post-punk voice with softening portamento on last beat.</i> i – bIII7 – II7 – bII - I – bIII7 – bIV [or V7 – I; false dominant/tonic] – i</p>	<p>BHBS administers poison, leaps from building to violin glissando; lands in sci-fi jet as StwBS and winks on 1st beat of soundless measure. Tracking shot through rear of jet, which flies into sun. The final shot of black birds flying into the future is deeply symbolic in its Hitchcockian spin.</p>
<p><b>End 03:31</b></p>	<p><i>The singer informs the listener that she is now ready to be intoxicated.</i></p>	<p>Overcharging of fourth beat due to pseudorhyme on “now.” Cadence onto violin motif.</p>	

## Notes

- [1] The question of cross-marketing, referred to in the film industry as “synergy,” is explored in much of the recent writing on film music, including Smith, Dickinson (*Movie Music* 145–46) and Donnelly (142–45).
- [2] Personal narrative of this kind is most closely associated with “confessional” singer songwriters who made their name in the 1960s, such as Joni Mitchell and James Taylor, although it could be extended to include performers who are better known for less direct forms of address but whose recent creative output has taken a confessional turn, including Annie Lennox and Suzanne Vega.
- [3] Research directly incorporating aspects of personal history is typical of early work in gay, lesbian, and queer studies, as seen in Brett, Wood and Thomas’s influential anthology *Queering The Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*.
- [4] For an approach incorporating Hall’s notion of “narrative of the self,” see Albiez. See also Hall (277). On self-identity in developmental psychology, see Macdonald, Hargreaves and Miell.
- [5] This deployment of the term markedness, which denotes how narrators invest personal histories with significance, resembles approaches in semiotics (e.g. Hatten) which examine ways in which meaning is constituted in music through practices of contrast and discursive foregrounding.
- [6] Our view that personal narrative is implicated also for listeners and viewers is consistent with recent writing on Judith Butler’s notion of the performative. In terms of the politics of visibility, agency has been associated by Butler with the supposedly passive act of gazing as well as with the more overtly active position of moving in order to hold the gaze (see Bell 6–7).
- [7] See *Music, Space and Place* (2004), Section 3.
- [8] Although the song is attributed in the credits to four writers, the British songwriter Cathy Dennis is identified in most sources as its principal author—of both words and music. Notably, Dennis is listed in the song’s credits as first author (in a non-alphabetical list); she also sings backing vocals on the recording. The inclusion of members of the Scandinavian production team Avant and Bloodshy attests to the constitutive role of “production techniques” in the sonic identity of the song.
- [9] See Angela McRobbie’s discourse on girl camp in “*More!*” and on women’s magazines in *Back to Reality* (v). See also Hawkins “Dragging out Camp.”
- [10] Note that the measure is silent only when it comes to *musical* sounds. In fact, the camped up wink is accented by the diegetic sound of a flight attendants’ call bell. This serves as a wake-up call both to listeners, who are returned by this gesture to the relative normality of life aboard the sci-fi jet, and to Britney as stewardess, who immediately turns to service a passenger.
- [11] Significantly, the video’s director, Joseph Kahn, completed his first feature length movie, *Torque*, immediately prior to filming *Toxic*. When working on the video, he borrowed cinematic techniques (including the use of aerial tracking shots, “geometric” editing techniques, and computer rendering), an actor (Martin Henderson), and the elements of visual style (particularly evident in the “hyperreal” motorcycle chase) from this film.
- [12] On the cultural connotations of guitar sounds, see Tagg and Clarida (366–78). For more on the use of a simulated Fender sound in the theme music of *Twin Peaks*, see Richardson (84–85).
- [13] The genealogy of electronic sounds in science fiction goes back almost to the birth of the genre. A significant example is the use of the theremin in 1950s science fiction B movies. See Wierzbicki and Lack (310–21).
- [14] On the notion of the posthuman, see Halberstam and Livingston (1–19). For more on the connection between electronic dance music and tough female protagonists in science fiction, see Kassabian (“The Sound”). Interestingly, Moby worked on the soundtrack to *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* as well as producing a song on Britney’s *In the Zone* (“Early Mornin’”). Backing vocals on the album are attributed to “The Matrix.”
- [15] On the historical construction of this voice, see Potter.

- [16] For instance, the characterization of her voice found on Wikipedia: 28 Apr. 2006 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Britney\\_Spears](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Britney_Spears)>.
- [17] Kay Dickinson has described how “Cher phases in and out of traditional notions of vocal ‘reproduction’ and deliberately obvious track manipulation” (“Believe” 171). Also see Hawkins (“On Performativity”) for an analysis of digital editing devices and intricate mechanisms of recording technology that signify a denial of Madonna’s “natural voice.”
- [18] See also Bellman.
- [19] See McRobbie (“More!”).
- [20] In an earlier study of Madonna’s track “Music,” it was argued that, in much pop, camp constitutes a central part of a commercialized directive that is a political force. See Hawkins (*Settling*).
- [21] For a genealogical critique of the queer subject and the centrality of queer politics in queering, see Butler’s seminal work *Bodies that Matter*. Also see Morland and Willox for a wide range of essays addressing the cultural politics of sexuality and gender through queer theory. Most of the authors in this volume acknowledge how the shifting signifiers of queering move in and out of mainstream texts.
- [22] See Gauntlett, who takes up this issue when he builds on Angela McRobbie’s studies that deal with the new-found mainstream sexual assertiveness which has a resonance from feminist traits two decades earlier.

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